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Role-playing, the flexible acting out of various types of problems in a permissive group atmosphere, was aimed at developing a full, inner feeling about a situation from acting out how other people actually felt in the situation.

Role-playing was especially useful for low-income groups because they express themselves more readily when reacting to things they can see and do. Also the pattern of low-income people working together and responding to one another was favored by role-playing. Role-playing promoted group feeling and understanding through its informality and easy pace.

Some of the problems of low-income people that could be role-played were community organizations, family problems, gang and youth problems, and authority problems. Role-playing could also be used by the social workers themselves.

Role-playing accomplished a number of things including changing attitudes, making people aware of the feelings of others, and allowing a freedom of expression. The learning that took place in role-playing was incidental learning, kinesthetic, and emotional learning, and helped increase an individual's awareness of his potentials and possibilities.

Some of the techniques used in role-playing were reversal, soliloquy, projection, and non-verbal expression.

A two-stage session was outlined, and a bibliography was included.

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Role-Playing With Low Income People

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Mobilization For Youth
Training Department
November 1962

I. What is Role-Playing?

II. Why Role-Playing is especially useful for low-income groups.

III. Problems of low-income people that can be role-played.

IV. Role-Playing for social workers.

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ED001073

Jean Goldfarb
Frank Riessman
November, 1962

MOBILIZATION FOR YOUTH

TRAINING DEPARTMENT

Role-Playing with Low-Income People

I. What is Role-Playing?

A. The flexible acting out of various types of problems in a permissive group atmosphere, e.g., a caseworker interviewing a withdrawn client, a social worker explaining Mobilization For Youth to a policeman, a person being interviewed by a housing project manager in a low-income housing project.

1. As few as two people can role-play, such as a social worker and a client in an office, but most role-playing is usually done in groups where two people act out a situation and the group discusses it. At times, more than two people can role-play, e.g., a social worker interviewing a woman with five children present.

B. The development of a full, inner feeling about a situation from acting out how other people actually feel in the situation. For example, when the social worker role-plays the client, he can come to feel whether the client is angry, diffident, tense, frightened, etc.

C. Role-playing gives a picture of one's approach and style through discussion and certain special devices, e.g., reversal, projection, seconds, mirror (see below).

D. Aims to get a feeling of movement on a problem -- a small change rather than a complete solution.

1. Breaks the equilibrium and points to new approaches to a problem.

2. Increases the participant's role flexibility in an atmosphere where he can take a chance with different kinds of behavior.

a. He can act out life-like situations without the reality consequences which may be punishing.

b. Since it is free of the tensions of an actual problem situation, it stimulates the trying-out of new alternatives and solutions.

E. In the discussion following the role-playing, the group can learn as much as the role-player himself

1. Role-playing provides a common base for people with different frames of reference or background, for everyone at the session will have shared and seen the same incident together and can discuss it.

2. The group may suggest different ways to deal with the situation.

II. Why role-playing is especially useful for low-income groups

A. "In role-playing sessions we have had occasion to observe that the verbal performance of deprived children is markedly improved in the discussion period following the session. When talking about some action they have seen, deprived children are apparently able to verbalize much more fully. Typically they do not verbalize well in response to words alone. They express themselves more readily when reacting to things they can see and do. Words as stimuli are not sufficient for them as a rule. Ask a juvenile delinquent who comes from a disadvantaged background what he doesn't like about school or the teacher and you will get an abbreviated, inarticulate reply. But have a group of these youngsters act out a school scene in which someone plays the teacher, and you will discover a stream of verbal consciousness that is almost impossible to shut off." (Riessman, p. 77)

B. The low-income male doesn't like "talk" but wants "action." Role-playing is much more active than the usual interview.

C. Low-income groups favor things concrete, physical, visual, empathic, practical, such as role-playing offers.

D. Low-income patterns of working together, responding to one another, the concern with human contact, is favored by role-playing. Problems are shared and "solutions" are arrived at more communally. Frequently one low-income individual has successfully dealt with (or is capable of dealing with) problems which are overpowering to another disadvantaged person. Sometimes the experience of people like himself is more influential (is a better model) than the caseworker's aid.

E. Role-playing promotes group feeling and understanding through its informality, easy pace, use of humor.

F. The wholistic dimension of seeing-feeling-doing comes out in role-playing.

G. Role-playing takes some of the anxiety out of everyday situations that threaten the low-income person, e.g., if he fears a job interview, role-playing the part of the employer makes the latter a less threatening person.

H. The social worker (group leader) can participate in some of the situations, thus immediately and dramatically reducing the distance between client and worker. (The latter will be quickly viewed as down-to-earth, funny, human).

I. The client's anger, hostility and resistance to the worker can be much more easily expressed and worked with in role-playing sessions than in individual confrontation.

J. The social worker can learn more about the culture of the low-income person through role-playing (e.g., find out what it really feels like to be a member of a low-income family).

K. "Role-playing can be utilized in countless ways (in school) such as acting out a history lesson (George Washington signing the Constitution), teaching arithmetic and economics by playing 'store' and 'bank'. The role-playing itself is a marvelous stimulus for discussion, and it appeals to the deprived child's love of action. It provides for a much more vivid presentation and fits in with his desire for excitement and movement...role-playing should be a trigger for advanced discussion and thinking..." (Riessman, pp. 32-33).

III. Problems of low-income people that can be role-played

A. Community organization, e.g., forming a tenant's council in a housing project.

1. Shows how to present the plan to tenants you don't know, how to "knock on doors."

2. Develops and trains the natural leaders in the community.

B. Family problems, e.g., marital, relatives, child-rearing, problem children.

C. Gang and youth problems, e.g., dealing with an inter-racial incident, how to talk with a teacher, youth vs. parents, dealing with policemen and other authority figures.

D. Bureaucracy and authority problems, e.g., courts, employers, political leaders, how to speak at PTA meetings.

E. Leadership training for shop stewards, foremen, labor negotiators.

IV. Role-playing for social workers

A. Practice in canvassing for MFY, talking with policemen, teachers, housing managers, etc.

B. Use of role-playing in one-to-one relationships in the interview with a client.

1. Gain better understanding of client's problems and what his culture is like.

2. See what it feels like to be the father in a low-income family.

C. Work with drug addicts, alcoholics, e.g., induce the euphoria and sense of well-being through role-playing, without the drugs and the

D. Other Uses.

1. Training persons as Freedom Riders.

a. How to deal with difficult situations that might arise.

b. Screen out those who react violently to unpleasant incidents.

2. As a teaching device, illustrate points in a lecture with role-playing and thus add excitement to it.

V. Teaching "academic" material through role-playing

A. To professional personnel: In a program concerned with conveying low-income culture to teachers in the MFY community, one of the major approaches is to have the teachers visit the homes of their pupils. This is very valuable but is limited by the fact that only two visits of about an hour each take place during the term. Role-playing can be utilized very effectively here by having groups of teachers who have visited the homes meet together and act out some of the situations they have seen or participated in at the homes.

The experience of each teacher will be added to that of all the others but more important, through the technique of role reversal, the teachers can begin to know how the parents really feel. Here the group leader plays a decisive role. He should take a strong role in leading the discussion pointing out the meaning of much of the low-income behavior (and culture) that is role-played. He can bring in considerable academic content around the situations that have been witnessed by the audience. He can raise important questions which different members of the group, because of their varying experiences (in the homes), may be able to shed light upon. The reading of the group can also be discussed and integrated around the situations that have been role-played.

B. To non-professional personnel (indigenous leaders, homemakers, parent-education coordinators, etc.): Suppose the content of the Mobilization Program has to be understood and interiorized by a group of non-professional homemakers who are being employed by MFY. Rather than give a lecture about the program, role-playing could be used by having the homemakers try to act out situations in which they are telling families in the community about MFY. The homemaker would act as a member of the community, while another homemaker could be herself. In the group discussion which would follow each role-playing incident, the group leader (who would have considerable knowledge about the MFY program) could easily and meaningfully add to the information of the group.

VI. What does role playing accomplish?

A. It can produce attitude changes by placing persons in specific roles. It becomes apparent that a person's behavior is not only a function of his personality, but also of the situation and role in which he finds himself.

B. It trains a person to be aware of and sensitive to the feelings of others. This information serves as a feedback of the effect his behavior has on others.

C. It graphically illustrates how the same set of events can be perceived differently.

D. It allows the person to gain in the freeing of expression, the release of hostility and frustration.

E. Role playing is a little like witchery, as Moreno points out: by playing another person, you "take their sting away" and gain their magic power for yourself.

VII. What learnings take place in role playing?

A. Much incidental learning takes place (the person learns more than he realizes).

1. One learns by doing the role playing, by discussing it, and by witnessing it.

2. The experience may prove helpful at a later time, even though initially unaware that the learning was taking place.

B. Kinesthetic, emotional, experiential learning, not merely intellectual learning takes place .

C. Learning of role-flexibility and spontaniety.

1. How to do something a little different or surprising, thus bringing new movement into a situation.

2. Try newways of behaving to be later transferred and transformed in the actual problem situation.

D. Learning how to move, be physical, not merely sit and talk.

1. Explore use of pace, silence, gesture, the meaning of eye movement.
   a) Try to get the person to react to you through different tactics, e.g., walk in back of him, or stop talking altogether.

E. Increasing a person's repertoire and potential by helping him to explore his skills and possibilities.

F. The Emotional dimension in role playing constrains toward more meaningful insight and better carrying through (of changes in behavior).

VIII. The Techniques Used in Role Playing.

A. Reversal - the two players switch roles, e.g., the person playing the social worker then reverses and plays the client.

B. Second or double or backer-up - a person who speaks at the same time as the role player, quietly, standing behind him. He prompts the role player with words and gestures. He may be an able assistant of the group leader, or any person from the group.

C. Mirror - another person plays the same role, but exaggerating the person's main difficulty or weakness, thus clarifying the errors being made.

D. Soliloquy - if the person is diffident or has difficulty in expressing his thoughts to the other person, he may just face away and talk to no one in particular, e.g., "I wish this guy would leave me alone, he's making me angry, I feel like walking out..."

E. Projection - the person role plays the situation as he would ideally like it to be, e.g., the social worker tells what the "perfect" client would be like (cooperative, helpful, friendly). This acts as a positive catharsis.

F. Train participants in movement, gesture, non-verbal dimensions
   a) Have them gesture, move around, touch things, touch each other, use their body in expression.

   b) Movement may express feelings where words are limited. Words may be eliminated and the subject can "gesture" the way he feels.

G. Strong points as well as weak ones in the person's style should be emphasized, thus allowing the person to realize his full potential. Form as well as content should be discussed.

   1. In the example of the social worker trying to get clients to go to school, content is the specific arguments she might use.

   2. Form refers to the relationship he has with them as expressed through style, pace, movement, etc.

How To Conduct A Role Playing Session

Role Playing: Stage One

A. How do you begin?

1. Group leader chats informally with participants as the group gathers so as to get an idea of what they are thinking about, what is bothering them. He may also do this at a break in the middle of the session, at which time he can get an idea of the ideas and feelings of the less active participants. He may carry these ideas back into the second half of the session. Then after the meeting, in informal conversations, he catches the drifting feelings, and re-introduces them into the second session.

2. At first, the leader should not be didactic (not discuss what role playing is at length), as it will make people self-conscious. He should concentrate on having the group think about some problems they might be interested intrying out. Make the problem specific. If they say " a parent-child problem" the leader says "What kind of problem, how old are the children, what do they look like?" Thus he may begin to discover the things that interest and trouble various people in the group.

3. Begin with simpler problems, not with explosive or overly exciting ones. Start with more common problems of interest to many members of the group. Begin actual role playing with brief situations lasting only a few moments just to get things moving and get people involved. Encourage an easy, slow, informal atmosphere. The main goal is to get people into the role playing.

4. In getting started, Multiple Role Playing may be used. Here the entire audience forms into role playing groups, the size of the groups depending on the number of participants required for the particular case (although a dyad--two people role playing in each group--is preferred). All groups role play simultaneously. Afterwards, each group discusses its results. This technique quickly dispels initial feelings of shyness or self-consciousness.

5. Another way of getting started is to have many people role play one situation, e.g., social worker visiting a family with five children in it. This broadens the initial participation. (Later, the elements may be varied, e.g., by taking the children away or varying the role of the social worker).

6. If the group leader participates in the role playing, someone else should direct the session temporarily.

7. The role-player must not break outof their roles for intellectualising or discussing.

B. How to get volunteers

1. The discussion of problems that members of the group want to see acted out gives some idea of who might volunteer. During the session, watch people's eyes, movements, head shakes, etc., to see who is becoming involved, who shows a desire to participate.

2. Build interest around the problems, and usually some people will be eager to role play them.

3. Don't pressure people, but give a good try to get the person into it.

4. Do not encourage "actors" or those who are overeager to try, although in some cases you may be forced to use those people. The ideal person is one who is slightly diffident but is willing to give it a try.

5. Don't rush into the role playing but lead into it gradually.

C. Closing the first session

1. Toward the end, show what learning has taken place. Some people don't realize the incidental learnings going on and will be rewarded by having these pointed out.

2. Mention the emphasis on content as well as form (see Section VIII,G).

3. Point out that the aim is toward flexibility, not repetition of reality. Movement is all-important.

4. Some of the techinques used (particularly "reversal") may be discussed here (see Section VIII), as well as a briefing on what will occur in the second session.

II. Role Playing: Stage Two.

A. At the beginning of the session, remind the participants of what was role played at the last meeting. Then pick a new problem to role play for this session (after some discussion and warm up).

B. The techniques of role playing are explored in greater detail than before.

1. Manipulate the roles, e.g., make the client more aggressive, less cooperative, more friendly, etc.

2. Use soliloquy and doubles more (see Section VIII,D).

3. Be more physical.

C. Do surprising and different things.

1. Start singing or dancing or kicking over wastebaskets; show the effect of change of pace and movement.

2. Try to get the person to move his body. Try gesturing feelings without vocalizing them.

3. Change pace and develop interest by having the person play someone of a different age or sex. Change the attitude of the person being role played, e.g., have a happy person become depressed.

D. If a person has difficulty expressing a particular emotion there are ways to help him. For example, if the client in the role playing feels anger toward the social worker, she may soliloquize it, gesture it silently, or the situation may be changed to one in which the client can legitimately hate the social worker, e.g., say the social worker has recommended that her welfare payments be stopped. The important thing is to try to get the unexpressed emotion out into the open.

E. Since we concentrate on the problem rather than the role players' personality, try to discourage the person who may become over-involved and too emotional.

1. Here one may alter role playing standards and encourage increased intellectualization. Talk about the problem more generally and abstractly.

F. Closing: Stage Two*

1. At this point the group leader may become more didactic, pointing out the larger aims of role playing such as spontaneity and movement.

2. Show how role playing may be used in more extreme kinds of problems like drug addiction, alcoholism, etc. For example, if a person is suicidal, may have him play himself at his own funeral.

3. Discuss role playing in connection with other techniques such as hypnosis (hypodrama), dance therapy, drugs, etc.

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*This outline is based on a two session training course in role-playing given to the staff of Mobilization for Youth. The conclusion of stage two would more appropriately take place after four or five sessions, however.